Cultivating Mindfulness in the Context of a Sangha

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Dear Sangha, today is the 30th of July, 1998, and we are in the Upper Hamlet. We are going to speak English today.

The bell of mindfulness is an important practice in Plum Village. Every time you hear the bell, you shouldn't do anything, you shouldn't think of anything, you shouldn't say anything. You have to go back to your in-breath and out-breath, and listen very deeply. Because the sound of the bell is considered to be the voice of the Buddha calling us back to our true home, that sound is very sacred. The sound may be said to be something outside of you, but if you practice for a few days, you will know that that sound does not really come from the outside, it comes from the inside.

The Buddha is someone who is very close to us. The Buddha is the power of awakening, of loving, of understanding in us. Every time the Buddha is calling, we have to listen with all our being. That is why our minds have to be with our bodies; so we stop every activity, including thinking, and we go back to ourselves, using our breathing as a vehicle. We arrive, and we listen very deeply to the voice of the Buddha. That is the voice of peace, of stability, of freedom. If we don't know how to listen to the voice of the Buddha, we won't be able to restore peace, tranquility, and solidity inside ourselves. In Plum Village we enjoy the practice of listening to the bell very much. Every time I listen to the bell, I feel I am a better person. I am more solid, I am more free. I am calmer, more understanding. That is why everyone should profit from the practice of listening to the bell of mindfulness.

You will notice that in Plum Village we practice mindfulness of listening with other sounds. For, example, every time we hear the telephone ringing, all of us in Plum Village will stop our talking, stop our thinking, and go back to our in-breath and out-breath, and listen. Even though the sound of the telephone is a very ordinary kind of sound, when you practice, it becomes something very important too. We practice breathing, with the gatha: "Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home." "Listen, listen," that is what you say when you breathe in. When you say, "Listen, listen," that means "I am listening deeply," and when you breathe out you say, "This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home." My true home is where there is peace, there is stability, there is love, and I love to go home, because at home I feel safe.

We have been practicing telephone meditation for, I think, fourteen years now in Plum Village. All of us enjoy the sound of the telephone. The sound of the telephone does not irritate us anymore, because we can consider it to be a bell of mindfulness. The bell master does not need to be here, the bell master can be somewhere in Canada, or Russia; and suddenly we have a bell master ringing the bell for us to breathe in and breathe out, and we feel wonderful. When the first sound is heard, we stop talking, we stop thinking, we enjoy our in-breath and our out-breath, and we smile. When the telephone rings for the second time, we can still afford to breathe, to smile, to enjoy ourselves. We don't worry, because if the other person has something really important to tell us, she will not hang up after the second ring. Therefore we can still enjoy breathing and smiling with the second sound of the bell. When the third sound is heard,

you can stand up, and you can walk in the direction of the telephone, but you do it calmly, breathing and smiling while walking, and you practice walking meditation with a lot of dignity. You don’t run like a rabbit, because you have quieted yourself. You make each step like the steps made by a lion, very firm, very stable, and you are breathing in, calming, and breathing out, smiling. So you are still in a state of concentration. That is the joy of meditation, nourishing you with the element of stability and peace. When you pick up the phone and say, "Hello, this is Plum Village, may I help you?" your voice sounds fine. It sounds peaceful and loving. At the other end of the line, people will be glad to listen to your voice. If your voice is nervous, if your voice is troubled, that would not help very much.

Everyone in Plum Village has to learn how to be in charge of the telephone. You may be in charge of taking care of the telephone one day, and during that day, you practice telephone meditation very, very well. You practice breathing in and out when you hear the telephone ringing, and you practice using loving speech. Your voice should be calm, solid, and loving. You will have an opportunity to practice all of these things, and the next day it will be someone else’s turn to practice taking care of the telephone.

If you are the one who is calling, you can also practice telephone meditation. There is a beautiful poem that we use before we make a phone call. In Plum Village, we always do it that way; we never pick a telephone up before we practice mindful breathing and mindful smiling. The poem goes like this: "Words can travel hundreds and thousands of kilometers, and they are supposed to build up more understanding and communication. I am determined that my words will be like jewels. I am determined that what I say will be like flowers." You make the vow to practice loving speech. The poem has four lines; the first line is for your in-breath, the second line is for your out-breath. Therefore, if you practice with the poem you have a chance to practice breathing in and out twice, while you use your right hand, or your left if you want, to touch the telephone. While breathing you calm yourself, and you smile. And after you have practiced breathing in and out like that twice with the gatha, you are fresh, you are calm, you are qualified to make a phone call. That is not only good for you, but good for the other person who will receive the phone call. After having practiced breathing and smiling two times, you begin to dial the number, and after having dialed, you hear the sound of the telephone ringing in the other house. What does it mean? It means that you have another chance to practice breathing in and breathing out.

The other person is still sitting there calmly, listening to the telephone ringing and breathing in and out. She will not come and pick up the telephone just after the first sound, because she is practicing telephone meditation also. So you know that she is still practicing, and you tell yourself, "She is breathing and smiling; why not me?" So you don’t wait, you just enjoy your breathing and smiling with the sound of the bell that you hear in the telephone. You know that you have to breathe with at least three sounds of the telephone before the other person will pick up the telephone. If you add it up, you will see that making a telephone call like that, you have at least five sounds with which to practice mindful breathing. Do you know how many mindful breathings you can make with five sounds? With every sound like that you can breathe for one or two or three times, in-breath and out-breath.

Every time we start a Dharma discussion or a Dharma talk, we always invite the bell to sound three times, and after one sound of the bell we breathe in and out three times. This means we breathe in nine times, and we breathe out nine times, and that is enough to bring calm and stability into us. While eating we also practice breathing in and out with three sounds of the bell. So the sound of the bell in Plum Village is quite important, and we also make use of the sound of the telephone. When the other person picks up the telephone, you have already breathed in and out a lot, and smiled a lot, and you are now much better than before you started using the telephone. That is very good for the other person. Talking to each other like that, you see that the quality of your conversation is much better, because you have vowed to say only nice things. You don’t reproach, you don’t punish the other person, and you don’t blame him or her, because you know that blaming or reproaching never helps. So you use only loving speech in order to help the other person to understand you. Communication is a very important practice. Imagine if everyone living in your city practices telephone meditation. There would be much more peace and understanding and joy in your city. People would not be as nervous as they are, people would not be unkind to you, because everyone would know how to practice breathing in and out mindfully, calming and smiling. Everyone would know how to use words that are beautiful like flowers, like jewels, and therefore the quality of life in your city would be very much improved. Therefore, if you enjoy telephone meditation, you should try to help other people to learn and to enjoy telephone meditation also.

The first year we started telephone meditation practice here, we had some problems. We did not have enough

experience. When the telephone rang, all of us enjoyed breathing in and out and smiling and calming, and no one wanted to go and answer the telephone. So we had to appoint one person to take care of the telephone, and she had the right to enjoy breathing in and out only three times. But not every one of us likes to sit close to the telephone. We prefer to be working in the vegetable garden, or cleaning the meditation hall, even if we are in charge of the telephone, and every time we hear the telephone ringing, we have to stop and enjoy the breathing. If you were watering the vegetables, then you would have to stop and turn off the hose, and you would practice mindful breathing in and out. Only after the second sound, and the practice, would you begin to start to walk into the office. It takes time to go from the vegetable garden to the office, so the other person may have had to practice breathing in and out for ten sounds. That happened during the first three or four years in Plum Village—our friends had to wait for a long time. Therefore, they had an opportunity to practice breathing in, calming, and breathing out, smiling.

We not only practice with the telephone, but we also practice with the clock. Every time, every quarter of the hour, when the clock starts playing the music, everyone stops. In every dining hall here in Plum Village there is a clock, and when the clock starts to play music, everyone stops eating, and just listens to the clock very deeply, just as they listen to the bell or the voice of the Buddha. So they enjoy it very much. If it happens that their mind is not there, with the Sangha and with the food, then they have a chance to go back and enjoy the food, and enjoy the Sangha. So the clock is also helping us to go back to ourselves and practice mindful breathing. There are those of us who wear a watch, and from time to time it goes, "beep, beep," and every time we hear that sound we go back to our mindful breathing. It's very helpful.

Fifteen years ago I was in Montreal, and a friend of mine was driving me to the mountains for a mindfulness retreat. During the drive I noticed that on the back of every car there was the statement: *Je me souviens*. That was in the province of Quebec. *Je me souviens* means "I remember." I turned to my friend, and I said, "I have a gift for all of my friends who live in Quebec. While you drive your car, if you happen to see the sentence *Je me souviens*, you have an opportunity to go back to yourself and practice mindful breathing and smiling."

Driving your car you may get lost—not in the city, but in your thinking. You might not be able to live deeply in the present moment. While driving your car you might wish to arrive as quickly as possible, and you continue to think of this or that, getting lost in your thought and your worries. But every time you see the words, *Je me souviens*, it means "I remember to breathe and to smile" and *je me souviens* becomes a bell of mindfulness. So at the retreat I said, "I have a gift to make to all of you. *Je me souviens* is a bell of mindfulness. Every time you drive and you see *je me souviens*, you have to go back to yourself, enjoy the present moment, enjoy breathing in and breathing out. The practice of mindfulness is the practice of being present in the here and the now. You make yourself fully present in the here and the now. You become completely alive in the here and the now. That is the basic practice. In order to be truly present, in order to be really alive, mindful breathing is a very wonderful instrument. Every time you go back to your mindful breathing, you become fully present, you become fully alive, and you can touch life deeply in the present moment. That is why many, many friends of mine in Canada have been practicing *je me souviens* while they drive.

I know that summer vacation is a season when people drive a lot, when there are a lot of accidents and traffic jams. It may not be at all pleasant to drive, but if you know how to practice *je me souviens*, "I am breathing in, breathing out," then the moment becomes pleasant and you will not get nervous because of the traffic jams. When you come to a red light, you might wish that the red light would change as quickly as possible, so that you can continue to drive. You are very eager to arrive, and I don't understand why. It seems that you think that only at the point of arrival will there be peace and happiness, and I am not very sure about that. Sometimes when we arrive, the situation is worse (laughter). The practice of Buddhist meditation is to make the present moment alive and pleasant. You have to make it pleasant and alive and happy right now. That is why I would like to offer to you the red light as a bell of mindfulness. Every time you see the red light, you smile to it. It is a bell of mindfulness; it is a bodhisattva helping you to stop. The red light means "stop!"—stop your running, stop your anguish, stop your belief that happiness can only be possible at the end of the road, that is a superstition and is not true. Whether there is happiness or not depends on the present moment. So when you see the red light, look at it and smile, look at it as a friend, as a bodhisattva, as a bell master. Smile, sit back, and enjoy your breathing. "Breathing in, I enjoy the present moment. Breathing out, I smile." You try to live that moment with peace and freedom. You don't allow yourself to be caught in all kinds of afflictions, irritations and bad humor. We are prey for all these afflictions, and if you go back to yourself and use your mindful breathing and smiling, then you are a better self.

The children are wonderful. They remember what I have taught. I remember once that I gave a retreat for parents and children in southern California, and I talked about the bell of mindfulness, and also about the traffic light. It was reported to me that after the retreat one family drove home very excited about the dharma talk and the retreat, and they talked and talked and talked. Even when they arrived at the red lights they continued to talk. The only person in the car who remembered the teaching was a little girl, seven years old. She said, "Daddy, breathe in and out—the red light is there." The parents were ashamed, because they had forgotten all the teaching. They got excited about the teaching, but they did not practice. So if you are young, don't think that you cannot help. You can help. Every time you come to a red light, practice mindful breathing and mindful smiling, and if your daddy forgets to do that, you can say, "Daddy, breathe, smile, relax," and then life in the automobile will be much more pleasant.

I know that in our time many of us spend a lot of our lives in automobiles, and meditation practice can be done not only in the meditation hall, but according to the practice in Plum Village, meditation can be done in the kitchen, in the garden, in the office, in the car, everywhere. While in Plum Village we have to learn how to do it, because we cannot put aside a lot of time for sitting meditation. We have to be able to practice meditation wherever we are, and whenever we find it possible. This morning I visited the kitchen of the Upper Hamlet and I observed the gentlemen and the ladies who were chopping vegetables. I did not say "Hello, how are you?" to them, but I was fully aware that they were there, standing and cutting the carrots and the potatoes, preparing the lettuce in mindfulness. The time when you work in the kitchen is also the time for meditation. In Plum Village we have the habit that before a cooking team starts to work, they come and light a stick of incense and practice mindful breathing and offer the incense before they start cooking, because cooking is as holy as sitting meditation. In the morning, if you prepare breakfast, you can transform breakfast preparation into a meditation practice. Follow your breathing in and out, calming, smiling, and become aware of every movement you make. Calm and peace and joy can be obtained in the house, and your children can learn from you.

I used to visit the kitchen, and if I saw a monk or a nun doing something like cutting carrots, I would approach and just stand there, and practice breathing in and out. With my presence there, breathing in and out, I knew that the monk or the nun would be mindful also. So I brought my mindfulness to support the person who was working, and sometimes I would ask, "Dear one, what are you doing?" Most of the time I received an interesting answer, such as "Thay, I am enjoying breathing." That is a very good answer. Sometimes the answer was just silence, and he would look at me and smile. We understood each other very well. And if he said, "Thay, I am cutting carrots," that was the worst answer." Because I was there, and I actually saw him cutting the carrots, so I would have been blind not to see him cutting carrots. So if he answered like that, he had not got anything. So my question, "What are you doing, dear?" meant "Are you doing that with mindfulness my dear? Do you enjoy it?" That was the meaning of my question. That is the language of mindfulness, the language of Zen. So if you answered: "I am cutting carrots," that was a very bad answer. Any kind of answer, but not that one!

In the family, if we want to have more peace, more communication, more happiness, every one has to participate in the practice of mindfulness. First of all, mindfulness of breathing, every time we hear the sound of the bell, every time we hear the sound of the telephone. It would be very helpful if everyone in the family signed a treaty, that every time the telephone rings, everyone in the family would stay still and enjoy breathing in and breathing out, for at least two rings of the telephone…even the very small ones. If you practice telephone meditation like that for one week, you will see the difference. There will be more peace, more harmony, and more unity, in the house. That is why I think the young people can persuade their parents to sign a contract for practicing telephone meditation. You think you can do that? After having practiced telephone meditation for a week or two, will you write me a letter and tell me how you are doing with it? Now a lot of my friends are practicing telephone meditation—even businessmen. You know that businessmen are very busy. Now many of them know how to go from one building to another with walking meditation, walking mindfully, and breathing mindfully. And every time they make a telephone call they always practice mindful breathing in and breathing out. They very often make a series of phone calls, not just one, maybe five or six or seven telephone calls in a row. They have learned how to breathe in and out three times before each phone call. And I am very proud of them. They can bring the mindfulness practice into the busy life of a businessman.

So, the topic for your Dharma discussion today, for the young people, is whether it is possible to start telephone meditation at home. Of course, if you have a bell in your home, and practice the bell of mindfulness every morning, and every evening before you go to sleep, that would be wonderful. When you hear the small bell, please stand up and

bow to the Sangha before you go out and start Dharma discussion or whatever you would like to do today.

(Bell)

Bow when you hear the bell. You turn around to the Sangha; you bow again when you hear the bell.

(Bell)

And you go to your right, walking peacefully.

…The children understand what I tell them.

(Bell)

Someone has asked the question*: if someone has a mental illness, should that person go to a therapist first, or can that person start the practice of meditation?* I have heard a meditation teacher say "you have to go to a therapist first, and then you can come back to me." Still there are people who ask the question: *if you have a problem with mental illness, should you go to a therapist first, or can you already profit from the practice of Buddhist meditation?* I read somewhere that a lay teacher said that you can start by asking the person to sit down on the cushion for some time, one hour or half an hour, to see what happens; then you will know what to do.

I think the answer is that it depends on the type of meditation practice. There are those of us who have so much pain and suffering inside that they cannot afford to be still, to go back to themselves. Every time they sit still, and they begin to pay attention to themselves, they will have to touch the blocks of pain and suffering in themselves. They will be overwhelmed by the energy of suffering in themselves, and that is why they say, "Meditation is not for me. I cannot afford to sit down. It's too calm, and it is the ground for all the suffering in me to manifest." It is true that there are people who have no power to face their own suffering, and who are very much afraid of going home to themselves, because when they go home they will be in touch with the suffering in themselves. There are also those who are afraid of going to sleep, because these pains and sufferings can manifest themselves in dreams. What to do in these circumstances?

The answer within the Buddhist context is that you have to practice taking refuge in the Dharma, and in the Sangha. "Dharma" and "Sangha" here are very concrete things, not just ideas. First of all, taking refuge in the Sangha: the Sangha is a community of brothers and sisters who are practicing. In the Sangha there is the element of stability, the element of joy. The Sangha is a protection, and the Sangha always has a place to be, like a practice center. You go to a practice center and you meet the Sangha. The practice center is a space where everything is created in such a way that you can touch the elements that are refreshing, nourishing and healing. Everything you touch is refreshing, healing and nourishing, The Sangha that is in that place should play the same kind of role, supporting you, protecting you, and nourishing you.

As a member of the Sangha, you know how to walk. You walk mindfully, and with every step you generate the energy of solidity, freedom, peace and calm. You don't run, as on the outside. Every step helps us to go back to the present moment. Every step helps us to touch life more deeply. Every step helps us to touch the wonders of life that are available in the here and the now. Each member of the Sangha should be able to walk like that. In the world, people don't walk like that…not many of them. They are used to running, and they run in order to arrive somewhere, but in a practice center you should arrive at every moment, and every step brings you back to the here and the now, which is your destination. So when you meet the Sangha, you might identify elements of the Sangha who are authentic. Members of the Sangha know how to sit peacefully, wherever they sit: on the grass, on a bench, on the cushions, they always make their bodies and their minds dwell peacefully in the present moment. Sitting means to stop, and not to run anymore. You make yourself available to life, so that life in her turn will make herself available to you. If you are not there, then life will not be there either. Therefore, sitting or walking, you make yourself available, in the here and the now, and life will make herself available to you in the here and the now, also.

The Buddha said that the past is already gone, the future is not yet here; there is only one moment for you to live: that is the present moment. But most of us are not capable of living in the present moment. We are always thinking of the

past or the future, because we have anguish, fear, regrets, and anxieties within us. The capacity to be in the here and the now is to be cultivated by the practice. Members of the Sangha should be able to practice that every day, so that when they walk, or they sit, or they do things, they radiate the energy of life, of peace, of stability. The amount of energy, of peace and stability that they emit depends on the level of their practice. Every time you go to a practice center, you profit from that energy. When you see a brother walking like that, you are reminded that you are still running, and you should begin to walk like that too, in order for life to be possible.

Taking refuge in the Sangha is a very important practice. *Sangham saranam gacchami*—I take refuge in the Sangha—is not a declaration of faith; it is a matter of practice. Abandoned, alone, you get lost you get carried away. That is why you come to a practice center, in order to take refuge in the Sangha. You allow the Sangha to embrace you. You allow the Sangha to transport you like a boat, so that you can cross the ocean of sorrow. If you have a Sangha to belong to, if you have a Sangha to embrace you and guide you in your practice, you are a happy person. So taking refuge in the Sangha is a very deep practice, especially for those of us who feel vulnerable, shaky, agitated, and unstable. *I take refuge in the Sangha* is a very urgent practice. Wherever you are, you have to find a Sangha to belong to. And if your Sangha does not have that quality that you expect, then you should make use of your energy and your time to help build the Sangha, and improve the quality of the Sangha.

The place should be appropriate for the Sangha to be. The Sangha builder is like an architect. She knows how to create a space where peace can be. The trees, the water, the air, nature, should help a lot. Elements of the Sangha should include nature. A beautiful path for walking meditation is very important for the Sangha; it is an element of the Sangha. The air you breathe is very important, the trees surrounding you are very important. The water you see running, and singing, that is an important part of the Sangha. And in that space where nature is available to you, elements of the practicing Sangha are also available to you. This is what we very much need in our time. If you are an architect of the twenty-first century, you have to think of this—an island where we can take refuge, so that we will not be destroyed by the negative elements of life that exist everywhere. The Sangha builder knows how to create a space, and she knows how to convene members of a Sangha, who can live in harmony with each other, who can enjoy the practice, and who can serve as a supporting body for those who come to them. All of us need the Sangha. Creating Sangha is a very important task for all of us. If you enjoy the practice, if you are getting the transformation and healing that you need, then please think of building a Sangha for those you love, and for others who need a Sangha so much. Not only do children need a good environment and a good Sangha, but as adults we all need a Sangha for our protection and for our healing.

The Buddha was a wonderful Sangha builder, and he had many disciples who were excellent Sangha builders also. He knew that without a Sangha, without an environment, the transformation and healing of the people would be very difficult. That is why, if you are a therapist, if you are an educator, please think of it. Healing cannot take place without a place like that, or a body of people like that. You may help to relieve the suffering of someone, but if you put him or her back into his or her environment, then he or she will get sick again, in a few weeks, or in a few months. So after having helped him or her to heal, you should direct him or her to an environment where she can continue her healing and transformation, and she can become an instrument to help others. Our society is sick, many of us are sick, because the environment in which we grow up is not appropriate for our growth, for our peace, for our transformation. That is about Sangha. You need the first element, Sangha.

The second element is the Dharma. You have to take refuge in the Dharma, because the Dharma can protect you, the Dharma not as a Dharma talk, or a book, or a discourse, but the Dharma as the practice, embodied by people like yourselves. When you practice mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful listening to the bell, you bring into yourselves the element of peace, of stability, and you are protected during that time, and you begin to radiate the energy of stability and peace around you. That will protect your children, that will protect your beloved ones, and although you may not give a Dharma talk with your words, you are giving a Dharma talk with your body, with your in-breath, with your out-breath, with your life, and that is the living Dharma. The living Dharma is what we need. We need it very much, as we need the living Sangha. Inside the living Sangha there is the living Dharma.

There is a kind of energy that all of us have to be equipped with, and that is the energy of mindfulness. When we wear that energy, when we are inhabited by that energy of mindfulness, we are ready to go back to ourselves, and we are no longer afraid of the blocks of fear and anguish and suffering in ourselves. But if you don’t have that energy as your

strength, your protection, when going back to yourself you may be overwhelmed, even crushed by the blocks of pain and sorrow and despair inside you. The question of whether you have to go to a therapist first, before starting Buddhist meditation, could be answered like that. If you were equipped with the Sangha and the Dharma, then you would not need a therapist: you can go home to yourself, embracing the blocks of pain and sorrow and despair in yourself, in order to look deeply into their nature, and begin to transform them, without being a victim of these blocks of suffering. But if you try to go home to yourself without anything to protect you, you might get into trouble. Even if the therapist knows something about you, he or she would not be able to help you, because you are without protection. The therapist cannot be there with you twenty-four hours a day, and during the night or in the early morning, you might be exposed to the pain and the sorrow within you. Therefore, you have to learn the way to protect yourself from your own suffering. And your own sufferings are also yourself.

The principle of the practice in Buddhist meditation is to cultivate the energy of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha, and you can cultivate it. One day of practice can help you to strengthen the energy of mindfulness in you, and a week of practice can help to make that energy much stronger. When you are equipped with that energy, you will have no problem in going back to yourself, and looking deeply into the nature of your pain. The Buddha said, don't be too afraid, don't try to run away from your pain, your suffering. The only way for you to get out is to hold your pain, and look deeply into it.

When you have seen the true nature of your pain, you will see also at the same time the way out of it. That is the essence of the first Dharma talk that the Buddha gave to the five monks. That Dharma talk is about the Four Noble Truths, the first being ill being: there is ill being, there is suffering, there is pain. That is the First Truth. It is called a Holy Truth, because without it you cannot see the second truth, the third truth and the fourth one. If you try to run away from your suffering you cannot understand it, and without understanding its nature, you cannot see the way out of it. That is why suffering is a Holy Truth. But you cannot hold that suffering just like that you are still weak. That is why you need the Sangha, you need the Dharma, in order to generate that energy of mindfulness with which you can go back to yourself and hold the suffering in your arms, like a mother holding her baby in her two loving arms. Our pain and suffering is our baby, our baby that needs our attention, our care, and our tenderness. The Buddha advises us to go home and take care of that ailing baby; you have to have two arms, strong arms, loving arms, in order to pick up the baby and hold it. Those two strong arms, two loving arms, are made of the energy of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha; what makes a Buddha a Buddha is that energy. It is like the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was what inhabited Jesus Christ—he would not have been Jesus if the Holy Spirit had not been in him. But that is not something abstract. You have mindfulness, but you don't have it enough. You are capable of being mindful, but you get lost most of the time. When you pick up the tea, you can pick it up in mindfulness, or without mindfulness. When you drink the tea, you may choose to drink it mindfully, or not mindfully. In our daily lives we usually drink our tea without mindfulness. In our daily lives we breathe in without mindfulness. In our daily lives we sit down without mindfulness. Our practice here is that we try to be mindful of everything that we do, of everything that happens in the present moment. Mindfulness is the capacity of being aware of what is going on in the here and the now. When you drink your tea mindfully, that is the practice of mindfulness of drinking. When you breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing. When you walk mindfully, that is mindfulness of walking. And when you eat mindfully, that is mindfulness of eating. You have plenty of chances to practice mindfulness.

If you go to a mindfulness retreat for seven days, these seven days are only for the practice of mindfulness. You learn how to do everything mindfully, and surrounding you are brothers and sisters who are trying to do exactly the same. Therefore the practice becomes easy. At home you are alone; you are not surrounded by people who practice mindfulness. But here, when you come, you are aware that everyone is trying to walk mindfully. Every step should bring them back to the here and the now, every step should help a little in the cultivation of stability and peace. So you are reminded by the presence of the sister in front of you, the brother on your left, the brother on your right, and behind you someone is walking mindfully also. You are embraced by the Sangha, and you should let the Sangha embrace you. Suddenly, the practice of mindful walking, mindful sitting, and mindful listening becomes possible. One week of practice like that will help to strengthen the power of mindfulness within you. Every one of us has a seed of mindfulness in us. We are capable of being mindful. The only thing is that we are not mindful all the time. The Buddha is someone who is mindful during the whole day. We can be a Buddha from time to time—we are part-time Buddhas. (Laughter.) With a Sangha we should each be a better Buddha every day.

Mindfulness cannot be mindfulness of nothing. When you breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing. When you walk mindfully, that is mindfulness of walking. The energy of mindfulness can help us to touch the positive elements of life, and also the negative elements of life. For beginners, it is very important to cultivate mindfulness in order to touch the positive aspects of life. Of course, there are negative things in us and around us, but with the support of a Sangha, we should be able to touch the more positive aspects first. Because in the beginning we are not strong enough to go and touch the negative things in us.

If you are a therapist, and you want to apply this principle to your practice, when your client comes you inquire about the things that have not gone wrong yet. The tendency is to ask what is wrong. Your patient or your client is there to tell you what is wrong with him or with her, so both of you are inclined to talk about what is wrong. But according to this practice of mindfulness, you can do differently. You can inquire about the things that have not gone wrong yet: what is not wrong? You talk about it, you become aware of that, and by touching the positive aspects that are in her and around her, you help her to get the nourishment that she needs. She needs a little bit of joy, stability and peace. You help her to restore the balance. Otherwise the painful aspect is too heavy. I think this is possible. Inviting your client to go for walking meditation is possible…and sharing a tea meditation, where people share their joys, their successes in the practice, their capacity of being peace, of reconciliation, and so on.

You as a therapist also need a healthy Sangha. You will not be the best therapist if you don't have one. And when you introduce your client into that Sangha, your client will feel better right away, in the very beginning. You have to create a space, a Sangha. A therapist without a Sangha to me seems like a musician without an instrument. A teacher also, without a Sangha, cannot do much. The Buddha was very aware of that. He spent a lot of time on Sangha building. He had a lot of difficulties in his efforts to build a Sangha, but he succeeded. His Sangha had enough strength, stability and peace.

The Buddha had a friend who was a king, who was born in the same year as the Buddha—the king of Kosala. His name was Pasenadi. When the Buddha first came to teach in his kingdom, he did not like the Buddha. The Buddha was still very young, and many people called him the enlightened one, and he did not like that. He preferred older teachers. But finally he came to a talk by the Buddha, and he was convinced by the virtue, by the peace, by the compassion of the Buddha, and he became his disciple. At the age of eighty, they met for the last time before the king died. During that time of meeting the Buddha, the king said something like this: "Lord Buddha, every time I look at your Sangha I have more confidence in the Lord." He had direct access to the Buddha--he visited Sravasti, the Jeta Grove where the Buddha lived with his monks, any time that he wished, and he appreciated the Buddha very much. Yet, he made that statement. Every time he looked at elements of the Sangha that moved in dignity, stability and freedom, he had more confidence in the Buddha. So the Sangha helped the Buddha a lot in helping people. That is why I said that a good teacher would need a Sangha. Without a Sangha a teacher cannot do much. You, as a therapist, need the same. In the Sangha you have an instrument to prove that healing is possible, transformation is possible, joy is possible. With that Sangha, you can be much more successful in your attempts to help people. The same thing is true with educators, physicians and artists.

Sangha building is not a matter for Buddhist practitioners alone. Everyone has to learn something about Sangha building, because a Sangha is a very important element for us to help people. Dharma, in this case mindfulness practice…the practice is conducted in such a way that the energy of mindfulness is generated every moment of your daily life. Walking, sitting, breathing, carrot cutting, breakfast making, everything should be done in mindfulness, to help the grain of mindfulness in you to grow, so that every time you need it, you need only to touch the seed of mindfulness in you, and there you are, embraced by the energy of mindfulness. With that energy of mindfulness, you can touch all the beauties and wonders of life in the here and the now, for your own nourishment, and with that mindfulness energy you can embrace the pain, the sorrow, the anguish, and begin to transform them. Without that you cannot do much. So Sangha and Dharma are what you need. Sangha is the practice center with its members, and Dharma is your daily practice of mindfulness, supported by the Sangha.

In the beginning of the practice, with the support of the Sangha, you will be able to restore balance, in order to be able to touch what is beautiful, refreshing and healing around you, and even in yourself. Even if you think that everything inside goes wrong, that is not true--just a few things have gone wrong. There are still many things inside that have not gone wrong yet. The Sangha will help you to go home to yourself and touch these wonderful things. And the same

thing is true with what's around you. It's like a garden—your body, and your consciousness and your environment are like a garden. Maybe there are a few trees and bushes that are dying. You might have let that kind of sight overwhelm you, creating a lot of anguish and suffering. You are not aware that there are still many trees that are solid, vigorous and beautiful. When we come into your garden, we can help to point out to you that you still have a lot of beautiful trees, so why do you cry like that? You have to enjoy the things that have not gone wrong yet within your landscape. And that is the role that the Sangha can play. The therapist has to do the same: identify what is not wrong, and help the client to touch and to embrace those things.

Before a surgery, the doctor will look at your body to see if your body has enough strength to endure the surgery, and if you are still weak, then he or she will help to bring a little more strength into your physical body, so that you can tolerate the time in surgery. It is the same here. If the sorrow, the fear, the pain, is a little bit too much, then you should not go directly to it, trying to solve it as soon as possible. You should do the other thing first: you should lean on the power of the Sangha in order to enjoy the steps you make, and what you see, to enjoy the wonderful refreshing and healing things which are around you. The sky is still blue, the trees are still beautiful, the face of your little boy is still wonderful, and you are not capable of touching these. To you everything is still dark, negative. You have lost your capacity to smile, and you feel that left alone you cannot make it. But if you have a friend you trust, a friend capable of smiling, of enjoying a cup of tea, and if you go to him or to her, you will feel her energy support you, and walking with her in the garden, you will be capable of seeing that the dandelion is beautiful. Intellectually, you know that the flower is beautiful, but practically, you have no power to touch that beauty, because something is standing between you and that flower. You know that there are beautiful things, but you just cannot touch them. You think that you are going to die, to break down. Since your friend has come, walking beside you, sitting close to you, you feel the capacity of enjoying a cup of tea again. You feel that you can touch the beauty of the flower again. That is the spiritual strength, the positive elements in the other person that can support you.

When you come to a Sangha, you have to know how to profit from the energy of the other people in the Sangha. Many of them are capable of enjoying a beautiful sunset. Many of them are capable of enjoying a cup of tea and dwelling firmly in the present moment, and not allowing worries or regrets to infiltrate and spoil everything. Sitting close to these people, walking close to these people, you profit from their energy and suddenly you have restored your balance. You can do that, so don't use your time to speak about negative things. Make good use of your time, and practice touching the positive aspects of life in you and around you. The time will come when you have to be on your own, and without that energy of mindfulness, you cannot be on your own. Therefore, the time being with the Sangha is very precious. Allow yourself to use the time just to practice, to restore balance.

(Thay begins drawing on white-board.) Suppose there is a house, with a big basement, and a living room. Our consciousness is like that: we have a big storehouse, and a living room. In Buddhist psychology, we call the living room "mind consciousness." We call this lower part "store consciousness," because the basement is used to store many things. All our suffering, our fear, our despair, we want to throw all of them down there, lock the door, and not allow them to come up. We are afraid of going home to sit in the living room, especially when the living room is empty, because then the blocks of pain, of fear will always try to push the door open and go upstairs. These blocks of pain are there, within the depth of your consciousness. In the past we have lived in forgetfulness, we did not care about what was happening, and we have allowed these blocks of pain and suffering to be formed. We didn't know how to prevent them from being formed—we call them "internal formations." The Sanskrit term is *samyojana,* blocks of pain, of sorrow, of fear, of anger, of attachment.

We are afraid of going home to ourselves because we know that if we do, we will have to face these blocks of pain when they manifest themselves. That is why our practice is to keep the living room always occupied. Most of us follow that policy: every time we feel that it is empty, we invite someone to sit there in order to occupy the room. That is the easiest way to prevent these things coming up. We complain that we don't have the time for ourselves, but when we have one hour, three hours, we don't know what to do with this time. We feel threatened, because if we sit alone in the living room, these monsters will try to come up, and therefore most of us will do something like picking up a magazine to read, or turning on our television sets to watch, or picking up the telephone to talk with someone. We cannot afford to sit in the living room without doing anything. We are afraid. We have to consume. Some of us take refuge in eating: we go to the kitchen and open the refrigerator, and we eat in order not to think of these things. This is the practice of repression. We don't see it as repression, but we are actually practicing repression. We want to keep all

these things down there, so we always invite someone or something to be sitting in the living room, and we close the door very carefully, so that these things will be unable to come up. And it works. We keep the living room busy, and the market will provide us with many means to keep this living room busy: television, radio, magazines, conversation, music, shows, and so on.

What happens, silently, is that we create a situation of bad circulation in our psyches. Our psyches are like our blood: they have to circulate well in order for us to be sane and healthy. If the blood does not circulate well, we'll have many kinds of trouble. Massage helps the blood to circulate better, or sometimes we take medicine to help the blood to circulate better. We know that good circulation of our blood is very important for the well being of our bodies, and if we exercise, we run, that is to help with our blood circulation. If we have a headache, it may mean that the blood is not circulating well, so massage can help. Because we have tried to suppress them, these things do not have a chance to come up any more, and that has created a situation of bad circulation in our psyche, and symptoms of mental illness can appear. They are there, and you believe that they are not active, but they are very active, day and night. They are acting from the depth of our being, and they shape our behavior, the way you behave here, as expressed by eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. The six senses are acting under the direction of the blocks of pain inside. You react in a particular way because the blocks of fear push you to react like that. If suddenly you panic, that is because of a block of fear in you, pushing you. So even if you try to block their way, they are still very important in your daily life, in shaping your behavior. This situation of bad circulation will result in the manifestation of symptoms of mental illness.

If you get depressed, don't think that the depression comes just like that. You have lived in such a way, you have dealt with your emotions, your sensations, your perceptions, in such a way that depression has become possible. Looking into the nature of your depression, you can find out how it has come to you. So, the answer is that blocking the way is not a healthy thing to do. You should be able to let it come up, but you are afraid. What you need is the Sangha and the Dharma. The Sangha can play the role of supporting you. The Dharma can play the role of helping you to develop the positive aspects in yourself. Mindfulness helps you to water the positive seeds in yourself. You are capable of contemplating the blue sky, you are capable of spending some time drinking tea with a friend, you are capable of walking meditation, in order to touch the wonders of life, and while doing so you strengthen the seed of mindfulness that is here in you. All of us have a seed of mindfulness. Maybe it is a little bit weak, but if you practice mindfulness of breathing, of walking, of eating, then that seed of mindfulness will become stronger and stronger.

When a block of pain manifests itself in the living room, your practice is to touch the seed of mindfulness, invite it to come up in order to take care of the block of pain that is there. Suppose this is your fear, or your anger. At that moment when your anger manifests itself, you have a zone of energy. Let's call it energy Number One. If you allow that energy to be alone in your living room, that would not be healthy. You've got to do something; you've go to practice. Your practice is to go back to your mindful breathing and touch the seed of mindfulness in you, and then you have the second zone of energy, called energy of mindfulness. This zone of energy is playing the role of a big brother or a big sister, embracing the pain. When the baby cries, the mother will come to the baby's room and pick the baby up, and hold the baby tenderly in her arms. You need to do exactly the same thing: "My little pain, I know you are there. I am here for you, taking care of you." That is the role of mindfulness. You hold your pain tenderly in your arms, and if you want the energy of mindfulness to continue to be there, you can practice continuous mindful breathing or mindful walking, because the mother has to be there for some time before the pain of the baby can be relieved.

Mindfulness is the energy that helps you to be there, to be there for your happiness and to be there for your suffering. Suppose you were standing with a group of friends, looking in the direction of the sunset. Mindfulness helps you to be truly there, body and mind united. That is why you can touch the beautiful sunset deeply, you are truly alive, you are fully present, and the beautiful sunset is there for you. A few minutes of contemplating the beautiful sunset can be healing, can be nourishing. But if you stood there with other people, and your mind was preoccupied by something else, if you were absorbed into your fear about the future or your regret about the past, even standing there with a group of people, you are not really there. You are not mindful. You are not in the here and the now. That is why mindfulness helps you to bring your body and mind back together to produce your true presence, and that presence is essential for you to touch what is happening in the present moment. In this case it is not a beautiful sunset, but the block of pain that manifests within yourself. So mindfulness is there to take care of the pain. "My dear depression, I know you are there. I am here for you, taking care of you." You need to maintain your mindfulness alive, because the

block of suffering is there, and needs to be attended to. We know that we are not only the mindfulness, but we are also the pain. The pain in us is not our enemy, it is us, it is our baby. We cannot run away from it, we have to embrace it, hold it tenderly in our arms, look deeply into it, take good care of it, and in that way we can transform it.

The practice is that every time your fear or your anger or your despair comes up, you should be able to invite your mindfulness to come up, and with mindful breathing, mindful walking, you embrace your pain as long as you need. After some time, a few minutes later, your pain will go down again in the form of a seed. "Seed" is a technical term in Buddhist psychology. *Bija* is the Sanskrit term. Every mental formation is there in the form of a seed. If someone comes and waters that seed it will sprout, and become a zone of energy up here. There are about fifty-one categories of mental formations here, and our fear, our anger, are just two of them. So there are positive mental formations and there are negative mental formations here. Positive mental formations have to be nourished, and negative mental formations have to be taken care of and transformed. You don't have to fight, because if you fight, you fight yourself--violence.

Buddhist meditation is based on the insight of non-duality. You are it. So the appropriate way is to deal with it non-violently, with tenderness. You embrace your pain tenderly, you recognize it, you don't try to suppress it. "Oh, my dear little pain, I know you are there. I am here for you, I will take good care of you." Mindfulness is strong in order to do the job. Your fear or your anger will go down after a moment, and become a little bit less important. Every time your pain is bathed in mindfulness, it will lose a little bit of its strength. If you practice you will see that. And the next time it comes up again, you do the same thing. "Hello, my pain, hello there, my despair; I know you are there. I am here, ready to be available for you." And you embrace it tenderly, in walking meditation, in sitting meditation, in mindful breathing. But you need to have this energy in order to do the job, and this energy is to be cultivated by the practice of mindfulness in the context, in the setting of a Sangha. That is why the Sangha is important.

If you have succeeded once in embracing and taking care, you are no longer afraid, you have confidence. Next time when your pain manifests you will do the same. In just a few weeks you can restore good circulation, and the symptoms of mental illness will begin to disappear. But that does not mean that you have to do it all by yourself; the Sangha can help you, the therapist can help you, the teacher can help you, the brothers and sisters in the Dharma can help you. If you think that your mindfulness is not strong enough for you to embrace your pain alone, you can ask a sister in the Dharma to sit close to you, a Dharma brother to sit close to you. He has his strength of mindfulness. "Dear sister, don't be afraid, I am here for you. I will take your hand. I will bring my mindfulness and join your mindfulness, and our mindfulness together will be enough for you to embrace your pain." Sometimes something is too heavy for one person to carry, and you divide the burden, with your friend coming to help you. And both of you can carry the heavy thing. The same thing is true here. If your block of pain is too heavy for you to carry, to embrace, then a Dharma sister or a Dharma brother can sit next to you and bring his or her support to you in embracing your pain. That has always been true. That is why, in the path of practice, to have a Dharma brother, to have a Dharma sister, is a wonderful thing.

Again, we need a Sangha. Without a Sangha I don't know how we can do it, how we can make it. Even if you learn a lot during a retreat, even if you know all the techniques of the practice, when you go back to your city, without a Sangha you can only continue for a few months, and after that your practice will decline until you abandon it completely. Without a Sangha you cannot go far. That is why taking refuge in the Sangha is a very crucial practice. In my country we used to say that when a tiger leaves his mountain to go to the lowland, the tiger will be caught by humans and killed. When a practitioner leaves his Sangha, he will lose his practice. That is why taking refuge in the Sangha is so important. Sangha building is very important. That is why we should find ways to set up a Sangha where we live, and try with our energy and time and resources to help improve the quality of the Sangha. That is for our protection and support, and for the protection and support of many people in the area. You can be a Sangha builder, and if you can build a Sangha, you can help so many people.

Again, I say that taking refuge in the Sangha is not a declaration of faith, it is a practice. If you are a monk, or you are a nun, you have to build a Sangha. But if you are not a monk or a nun, you also have to build a Sangha. If you are a doctor, if you are a healer, if you are a therapist, if you are a parent and you want to protect your child, you have to build a Sangha, because the environment is so bad that you can be sure that your child will get wounded and sick in that environment. So as a parent you have to think of the future of your child. Build a Sangha. And you have to meet with other parents to practice looking deeply in order to start building a Sangha, an environment where your child is

safe—it is very urgent. Meditation is not only for monks and nuns and those lay people who stay in practice centers. Meditation should be a thing that we have to do every day, right where we are, in our towns, in our cities, in our families. Please, in your Dharma discussions, discuss this: Sangha building for our protection and for the protection of our children and for the protection of our society.

(Three bells)

End of Dharma talk.